

# Maldives

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## Freedom of the Press

The environment for media remained challenging in 2013 as outlets struggled to cover ongoing political turmoil and polarization over the course of several postponements of the presidential election, which was ultimately held in November. Harassment and violence against reporters remained high, and journalists were also subject to legal cases and discriminatory treatment as they attempted to access official information and events.

The 2008 constitution protects freedom of expression, but it also places restrictions on speech deemed “contrary to the tenets of Islam,” and the overall legal framework protecting free expression remained weak in 2013. Defamation was decriminalized in 2009, but civil cases are still occasionally brought against journalists. In December 2012, the Parliament passed the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Act, which set out a number of limitations on journalists, including a requirement for accreditation by the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC), the body that regulates broadcast media. In March 2013, watchdog groups raised concern about the Parliamentary Privileges Act, which parliament passed by overriding a presidential veto, on the grounds that parts of the law could undermine journalists’ constitutional right to protect sources. In October 2013, the Supreme Court ordered police to investigate executives at Raajje TV following a report by the station concerning the judiciary that the judges alleged was “offensive.” The police referred the case for criminal prosecution in December.

Freedom of information is recognized as a fundamental right in the constitution, and has been regulated by presidential decree since 2009. At year’s end, the Parliament approved an Access to Information Law, which is expected to be ratified and come into force in 2014. The legislation was hailed as an improvement over earlier drafts by local advocacy groups such as Transparency Maldives because of its broad scope (it would apply to all state-funded institutions) and its detailed provisions for responding promptly to requests.

In September 2013, the MBC threatened to revoke the licenses of any outlet that broadcast information harmful to national security. Other decisions handed down by the body in 2013 sparked allegations of biased treatment. The Maldives Media Council (MMC), a statutory body consisting of eight media workers and seven members of the public, enforces a code of conduct for journalists and investigates complaints from the public against both print and broadcast outlets. While advocacy groups have raised concern about the potential for government influence over the MMC and lack of transparency in its elections process (the minister of information nominates the public candidates), during 2013 the MMC did criticize government encroachments on media freedom, voicing support for opposition outlet Raajje TV and filing a no-confidence motion against the MBC. The Maldives Journalist Association (MJA), formed in 2009, regularly made statements regarding media freedom issues and journalists’ rights during the year, accusing the government and political leaders of interference with private media in a number of cases.

Political tumult and increased polarization following the February 2012 removal of President Mohamed Nasheed from power has recently posed challenges for the media in accessing official information and covering events. In an unusual case supported by the MMC, Raajje TV, the only opposition-aligned private television outlet, brought a lawsuit against the president’s office, alleging discriminatory treatment. In April 2013, a court ruled in the station’s favor, ordering the president to provide Raajje access to covering official events. A civil court ruling in February had similarly censured the national police service for refusing to cooperate with Raajje TV, calling its actions unconstitutional.

Internet censorship is a growing concern. The Communication Authority of the Maldives (CAM) often blocks websites deemed anti-Islamic or pornographic by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. In December 2012, a penal court granted police a warrant to obtain the personal information of a user accused of “violating Islamic principles” on a news website’s comment board, the first case of its kind. In March 2013, Kula Yellow, a prominent Facebook page that supported Nasheed’s Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), was shut down by Facebook without notice, and several of the site’s administrators have also had their personal accounts blocked or shut down.

Journalists and media outlets faced attacks and harassment throughout 2013 as they attempted to cover the ongoing political turmoil. Reporters were repeatedly targeted when covering pro-MDP rallies, as was the case with VTV cameraman Rilwan Moosa in February and a number of reporters in September. Journalists were also assaulted after receiving targeted verbal or written threats, according to the MJA. In February, acid was thrown at two senior female employees of the MBC. Also that month, Ibrahim Waheed, the head of Raajje TV, was attacked with an iron bar in Malé, the capital. On October 7, the day of the Supreme Court ruling that delayed the elections, the station’s offices were largely destroyed by arson. Blogger Ismail “Hilath” Rasheed, one of the country’s best-known journalists and survivor of a stabbing attack in 2012, remained outside the country in 2013.

Private print media present a fairly wide diversity of viewpoints, although news coverage has become more polarized since the February 2012 change in government. Some publications are owned by allies of former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom or other key political actors, who exercise considerable control over content. Coverage by the state broadcaster, which assumed control of all government-owned media in February 2012, ignores opposition voices and favors the ruling party. The number of private radio stations has increased to six in recent years, while several private television channels, including Raajje TV, DhiTV and VTV, compete with the state-run broadcaster. Private outlets are authorized through individual agreements with the government rather than new broadcasting legislation, limiting their legal protections. Moreover, broadcasters remain subject to high annual licensing fees and must be relicensed every year. Therefore, most newspapers are not profitable and rely on financial backing from businessmen with strong political interests. Private media have been under significant financial pressure since 2009, when the government began publishing its advertisements in the weekly official gazette instead of private outlets. The internet was accessed by about 44 percent of the population in 2013, and the number of web-based news outlets and social-media use has greatly expanded in the past several years.

## **2014 Scores**

### **Press Status**

Partly Free

### **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

55

### **Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

## **Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

21

## **Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

16